

Ways to Be Mindful During COVID

Part I: Tips

Whether COVID has forced you to slow down or made your life a whole lot busier, it can help to pause and tune in to what's going on, how you feel, and what you need. Here's how.

What's the best way to describe your mind right now? Is it like a scary neighborhood at night? Your kid's messy bedroom? A sunny meadow? A foggy forest? A range of snowy mountains? What do you like about it? What lights things up? Anything you would like to change?

In checking in with yourself, you were just being mindful.

For some, the COVID pandemic has been a time to pause, to be at home, to connect with family, to have life be simpler. For others, pausing is a real challenge; for example, you might be working long hours as a healthcare worker, dealing with unemployment, or trying to save your business. Either way, odds are you are thinking about a lot and feeling a lot of emotions. The future is uncertain. You may be worrying about yourself and others. One way or another, COVID has changed your life. Mindfulness can't change it back, but it might still really help.

What Does it Mean to be Mindful?

Being mindful is about paying attention in a particular way.¹ You do it on purpose. In the present moment. Without judging. It is the difference between noticing your drive home or your walk outside, versus being on autopilot and not remembering what happened. You are more likely to notice what you are eating, versus finding that the cookies are gone, and you don't remember tasting them. Being more mindful means being more aware of your thoughts, your feelings, and the world around you. You spend more time in the present, and less time caught up in past regrets or fears about the future.

Why Does Being Mindful Matter to Me?

The goal of mindful awareness is to help you live a fuller, healthier life. Everyone can benefit from it, whether they have health problems or not. It is an overall approach to how you see the world, and how you live in the world. It can help you stay connected to what really matters. It can help you relax better.² It improves mood.³ With practice, you can even use it to change how your brain is wired, in many helpful ways.⁴

We don't have studies yet about how mindfulness specifically affects COVID-19 infections, but we do know it helps our immune system work better in many ways.⁵ For example, people who practice mindfulness have more of an immune response to getting a flu shot.⁶ Being mindful

also helps with anxiety and depression.⁷ It probably helps with chronic pain,⁸ post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),⁹ and many other health problems.¹⁰

How Can I Become More Mindful?

There are many ways to be more mindful. It may help to think of them in terms of informal and formal practices. Informal practices may *not* be intended mainly to make you more mindful, but they do help you focus, or bring you into the present moment. Examples might be getting totally absorbed in gardening, getting into 'the zone' playing a sport, doing something creative, fishing, focusing totally on playing with a little kid or a pet, spending time in nature, or reading something that means a lot to you, like scripture or poetry.

Ways to Be in the Present

What are some activities that help you focus? When are you the most aware of what is going on around you? Plan some time each day for these.

Formal practices were created for the purpose of helping people to be more mindful. Some have been used for thousands of years. They may or may not be tied to religion or spiritual paths. Many public places like hospitals and community centers offer them. Some examples:

- **Sitting quietly and clearing the mind.** For some people, this happens with prayer. It is also the focus of some types of meditation. Watching what thoughts, images, emotions, and sensations come up, without getting caught up in them, can really help.
- **Focusing on a particular phrase or sound.** Praying the Rosary can be a powerful focus. Centering Prayer encourages focus on a particular word or piece of scripture. Mantram Meditation involves focus on a particular word or phrase.
- **Moving in a focused way.** Some people find gentle movement, like tai chi, to be a chance to truly be focused on the present. Certain types of dance can also enhance mindfulness. Yoga is intended to quiet the mind through moving your body.
- **Adding breathing exercises** can be helpful.
- **Offering loving-kindness.** Many mindful activities could just as easily be called "heartful." Some ways to be mindful that involve sending love and compassion to others – loved ones and, perhaps, others as well.

Some General Tips

Whatever ways you decide to do to be more mindful, keep these tips in mind:

- 1) **Have a "beginner's mind."** Be open and curious as you try different options.
- 2) **Be flexible.** Create a plan that works for you.
- 3) **Ask for help.** You may want to connect with a teacher or someone else with experience.
- 4) **Set aside enough time.** Even a few minutes a day can really make a difference.
- 5) **Be patient.** This can be hard work. Your mind will wander, and the key is to keep bringing it back. That is actually a big part of the practice – just keep coming back.

- 6) **These exercises tend to be very safe.** If you feel uncomfortable at any point, just stop. Try something else, or ask an instructor for help. If you tend to have flashbacks or hallucinations, it is best to practice with the help of an instructor who can help you.

Giving Formal Practices a Try

Choose a formal practice to try. Set aside some time most days of the week to practice it. See what you notice after a few days. You can try different things, until you find some you like best. People usually start to notice some good changes after several days. For more information, see "Ways to Be Mindful During COVID, Part II: Resources."

This guide was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original created in March 2020 by Adam Rindfleisch, MD, Medical Director of University of Wisconsin's Integrative Health Program, and Mindfulness Instructor Chris Smith, MDiv, LMFT, through the support of the Whole Health Institute.

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References

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Ways to Be Mindful During COVID Part II: Resources

Whether COVID has forced you to slow down or made your life a whole lot busier, it can help to pause and tune in to what's going on, how you feel, and what you need. Here's how.

Where Can I Get More Information about Being More Mindful?

Being mindful can help people in many ways, whether they are totally healthy or dealing with a severe illness. To help you out, the following important (and often free) resources are worth a look. You can do this! Be curious. Try different things, give them some time, and see what you learn. You can't control everything going on in the world *around* you, but you can learn to understand – and manage – what is going on *inside* you.

Integrative Health Resources from the University of Wisconsin and UW Health

- Mindfulness Program at UW Health has [online mindfulness classes](https://www.uwhealth.org/meditation-stress-reduction/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction/49607) and [guided meditations](https://www.uwhealth.org/meditation-stress-reduction/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction/49607). Examples include *Body Scan*, *Sitting Meditation*, *Breathing Meditation*, *Body Sensations*, *Thinking and Choiceless Awareness*, *Compassionate Presence*, and *Loving Kindness Meditation*. <https://www.uwhealth.org/meditation-stress-reduction/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction/49607>
- UW Integrative Health Program [Clinician and Patient Education](https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/outreach/im/handout-IntroMindfulAwareness-Final.pdf) handouts include:
 - An Introduction to Mindful Awareness - <https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/outreach/im/handout-IntroMindfulAwareness-Final.pdf>
 - The *Mindful Awareness Practice in Daily Living* handout which includes guidance for a body scan, seated meditation, and mindful movement. <https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/outreach/im/handout-MindfulAwarenessDailyLiving-Final.pdf>

Whole Health Resources from the Veterans Administration

- For healthcare workers
 - *Bringing Mindful Awareness into Clinical Work* <https://wholehealth.wisc.edu/tools/bringing-mindful-awareness-clinical-work>
 - *Practicing Mindful Awareness with Patients: 3-Minute Pauses* <https://wholehealth.wisc.edu/tools/practicing-mindful-awareness-patient>

Other Online Resources

- Center for Investigating Healthy Minds. <http://www.investigatinghealthyminds.org/>
- Dartmouth College Student Wellness Center. Multiple, short guided meditation exercises. <https://www.dartmouth.edu/~healthed/relax/downloads.html>
- Dharma.org. Huge array of exercises. <http://www.dharma.org/resources/audio/>
- Foundation for Active Compassion. <https://foundationforactivecompassion.org/media/category/listen/>

- Free Mindfulness. <http://www.freemindfulness.org/download>
- Stop, Breathe, and Think. Meditations and a smartphone app. <http://stopbreathethink.org>
- The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.
<http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/recordings>
- UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center. Has several exercises, including some in Spanish. <https://wholehealth.wisc.edu/tools/practicing-mindful-awareness-patient>
- University of California San Diego Center for Mindfulness. <https://mbpti.org/>
- University of Massachusetts Center for Mindfulness videos.
<https://community.cfmhome.org/c/video-room>
- University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health Mindfulness in Medicine digital resources. www.fammed.wisc.edu/mindfulness/

Smart Phone Apps (Android and iOS)

Most of these are free, but some may charge if you want to get additional materials

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| • 10% Happier | • iMindfulness |
| • Aura | • Insight Timer |
| • Breethe | • Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics |
| • Buddhify | • Smiling Mind |
| • Calm | • Stop, Breathe & Think |
| • Headspace | • UCLA Mindful |

Books

- *Beginning Mindfulness: Learning the Way of Awareness*, Andrew Weiss (2004)
- *Calming Your Anxious Mind: How Mindfulness and Compassion Can Free You from Anxiety, Fear, and Panic*, Jeffery Brantley (2007)
- *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, Jon Kabat-Zinn (2006)
- *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005)
- *Good Morning I Love You: Mindfulness & Self-Compassion Practices to Rewire Your Brain for Calm, Clarity & Joy*, Shauna Shapiro (2020).
- *Happiness: Essential Mindfulness Practices*, Thich Nhat Hahn (2005)
- *Leave Your Mind Behind: The Everyday Practice of Finding Stillness Amid Rushing Thoughts*, Matthew McKay (2007)
- *Mindfulness in Plain English*, Bhante Henepola Gunaratana (2002)
- *Practicing Mindfulness: 75 Essential Meditations to Reduce Stress, Improve Mental Health, and Find Peace in the Everyday*, Matther Sockolov (2018)
- *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Thich Nhat Hahn (1999)
- *The Path of Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God*, David Frenette (2012)
- *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle (2004)



For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health	A variety COVID resources	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/
Whole Health Institute	Whole Health resources	Coming Soon!

This guide was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original created in March 2020 by Adam Rindfleisch, MD, Medical Director of University of Wisconsin's Integrative Health Program, through the support of the Whole Health Institute. The resource guide was inspired in part by the resources offered in the Passport to Whole Health, available at <https://wholehealth.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/414/2018/09/Passport-to-Whole-Health-3rd-Edition-2018.pdf>, created by the VA's Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation.

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